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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Back of Beyond**

Written by C. J. Box

Published by Corvus

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**BACK OF  
BEYOND  
C.J. BOX**



CORVUS

First published in the United States of America in 2011  
by St. Martin's Press.

This paperback edition first published in Great Britain in 2012  
by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 3 5 7 9 10 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-84887-297-4  
eBook ISBN: 978-0-85789-424-3

Printed in Great Britain.

Corvus  
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd  
Ormond House  
26-27 Boswell Street  
London WC1N 3JZ

[www.corvus-books.co.uk](http://www.corvus-books.co.uk)

*For T. Jefferson Parker, Brian Niprud,  
and Ken Wilson (The Gauntlet)  
... and Laurie, always*

*Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed*

—'Canto 56', In Memoriam A. H. H.  
*Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1850*

PART ONE

MONTANA

THE NIGHT BEFORE Cody Hoyt shot the county coroner, he was driving without a purpose in his county Ford Expedition as he often did these days. He was agitated and restless, chain-smoking cigarettes until his throat was raw and sore. He drove right by the rural bars he used to frequent, not going in. Then the call came from dispatch on his cell phone: hikers claimed they found a burned-out cabin in the Big Belt Mountains to the north-east with maybe a dead body inside.

Even though it was the end of June the weather was unseasonably cold and it had rained in the valley for three straight days. That evening, before the clouds finally lifted and the sun died, he'd seen a dusting of snow on the tops of the Big Belts to the north and the Elkhorn Mountains to the south. *Snow.*

"Patrol has been sent up there," Edna the dispatcher said. He liked Edna even though she'd decided she was his surrogate mother and gave him pies and casseroles and tried to fix him up with Helena divorcees. She said, "My list says you're the one on call tonight."

"Yeah," he said. Cody was a Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's Department investigator. Detectives were

automatically called to investigate any “unattended death,” meaning accidents, suicides, or in the rare instance, homicides.

“Because you have nothing else to do,” she said, mock joking.

“Not a damned thing,” he said, deadly serious.

“Are you at home?”

“Yeah,” he lied. “Watching the game on TV. Just a second, let me grab something to write on.” He knew if Edna wanted to she could fire up the tracking screen in the dispatch center and find the location of his vehicle out in the county because of the GPS unit mounted under the front bumper. Or she could have at one time, before he dismantled it the month before because he didn’t want anyone knowing where he’d been going or that he spent his other nights driving, driving, driving.

He pulled to the side of the road into the rough parking area in front of the Gem State Bar, the tires popping on the wet gravel. A single mercury vapor light on a pole threw dark shadows across the parking area. Pools of standing water from the recent rain reflected the light and the few stars that had appeared between night thunderheads. There were five other parked vehicles in front of the bar, all pickups. His pen was somewhere in the ashtray, which was spilling over with butts. As he pulled it out he noted the plastic barrel of the pen was rough with burn marks.

“Okay,” he said.

“The cabin is located past Vigilante Campground on Highway 280, eight miles up Trout Creek on County Road 124. The map shows it’s in the Helena National Forest, but maybe there’s a private place up there.”

He lowered the phone and sat back and closed his eyes without writing anything down. Outside his driver’s side



window, two men wearing dirty jeans and hoodies and ball caps pushed their way out the door of the bar. He recognized them as sapphire miners. Sapphire mining was a small industry in the county, and there were scores of one- and two-man claims that had been worked for years and still produced. The miner in the gray hoodie was practically as wide as he was tall. The one in the yellow hoodie was gaunt and skeletal with eyes sunk deep in their sockets. They were laughing and shoving each other. Yellow Hoodie had a twelve-pack of Coors Light under his arm for the road and he'd no doubt leave a trail of empties all the way up into the Big Belts to his little one-man mine. They looked up and saw him parked but didn't straighten up or try to act sober. He was just a guy in a muddy SUV to them because the vehicle was unmarked. Even the plates didn't give him away because they were skip plates. If anyone ran a check on them, they'd come back to a fictitious address and company name.

"Cody?" Edna asked.

"I'm here."

"Did you get that?"

"Yeah."

"The complainants called from the York Bar. They agreed to stay there until they met the officer so they could guide him to where the cabin is. Officer Dougherty was dispatched to the scene and he is there with them now taking their statement. Should I ask them to stay until you get there?"

"Not necessary," he said, "I know the cabin. Tell Dougherty to proceed—I'll meet him there. What did they say about a body?"

"Not much really. They said they thought it was an old place by the look of it and they poked around inside a little. They said that they think there's a body there because of

the smell and what looked like a human hand, but they didn't actually see the body. They said it was raining hard and getting dark and they just wanted to get out of there."

"Male or female body?"

"They don't know. They said the hand might have been a glove or the arm from a dummy because it didn't look real."

He nodded to himself. Fire turned human bodies into sexless grotesques. He'd been on the scene where the fire was so hot the dead muscles of the arms and legs cooked and roasted and contracted the body into a fighter's stance: arms curled against the chest and knees bent, like a boxer in the ring. And the smell, like charred pork . . .

Outside in the parking lot, the two miners put the twelve-pack on the hood of a pickup and pulled out two cans and opened them. The spray from a can hit Fat Gray Hoodie in the face and he bellowed a laugh as he took the beer.

"Okay," Cody said to Edna.

He said, "Edna, call Larry. Tell him I need him."

Larry Olson, the only other detective in the five-man Criminal Investigations Division whom Cody thought was worth a damn. Olson was short, solid, and shaved bald; a flesh-colored fire hydrant who entered a room like a quiet exclamation point. Larry Olson was a Montana legend. He'd solved crimes by careful observation and exhaustive investigation. He wore suspects down. He wore his fellow detectives down. When an unsolved crime went on too long anywhere in the state, the call went out to "borrow" Larry Olson. The word was the only reason he stayed in Helena instead of going state or federal was that he wanted to be there for his three boys who lived with their mother in town.

Edna said, "Larry's not on call tonight."

She waited for him to acknowledge, but he didn't.

Finally, she said, "Cody?"

He held the phone out away from him at arm's length and made a gargling sound in his throat that resembled static. He said, "I'm losing the signal right now. Call Larry. I'll call back when I get a better signal," and closed the phone and dropped it to the seat. Overwhelmed with a wave of nausea and needing air, he pushed open the door and stepped outside, his boots splashing in a deep puddle.

"Good one," Skinny Yellow Hoodie said, laughing. "Right in the hole."

Cody ignored them as he bent forward, grasping his knees with his hands. He breathed in the moist mountain air, filling his lungs with it. Mixing it with the smoke. His eyes watered and he stood and wiped at them. Cold water poured in over the top of his low boots, filling his socks. He wished he'd worn his cowboy boots instead.

"You okay?" Yellow Hoodie asked.

"Fine."

"Want another beer? You could probably use one now."

"No," he said. They assumed he'd been drinking. Or, he thought, they recognized him from when he haunted the bars.

"This fucking rain, eh? Day after day. My dad said never curse the rain in Montana, and I never have. But this is motherfucking *crazy*. El Niño or some such thing. I heard the weatherman call it 'The summer without a summer.'"

Cody grunted.

"Want a hit?" Fat Gray Hoodie asked in a voice indicating he was holding his breath in, and Cody realized the man was holding a joint between his fingers. Cody's face must have cracked the miner up because he coughed and expelled the marijuana smoke in a cloud.

“Jesus Christ,” the skinny miner said to Cody. “Don’t mind him.”

“Just being friendly,” the second miner said, bringing the joint back up to his mouth.

Cody Hoyt was thirty-eight years old but often mistaken for being in his late forties. He had unkempt sandy hair, a square jaw, high cheekbones, a broken nose, brown eyes flecked with either gold or red depending on the circumstances and often described as either “mean” or “dead,” and a mouth that twisted naturally into a cop smirk even when he didn’t want it to. He wore jeans, boots, and a loose long-sleeved fishing shirt. Detectives didn’t wear uniforms and dressed to blend into the community. He reached down and pulled the hem of the shirt up so they could see the seven-point gold sheriff’s department badge on his belt.

“I got a card for this,” the smoking miner said quickly, nodding to the joint.

Practically every sapphire miner in the county had a card signed by a doctor for medical marijuana use, Cody had found. And many of them grew plants in quantities and potency well beyond simple home use. It wasn’t a coincidence that the miners used most of the same instruments—scales, small tools, hundreds of small Ziploc bags—dope merchants used.

Cody raised his .40 Sig Sauer in a shooter’s grip.

“Really,” Fat Gray Hoodie said, stepping back and dropping the joint, which extinguished with a hiss between his feet in the mud, “really, I got a card. I’ll show you. Shit, I know I’m not supposed to smoke in a public place, but damn, my back started hurting . . .”

“Give me the rest of the beer,” Cody said.

Both miners froze, then shot glances at each other.

“You want the beer? You can have it,” Yellow Hoodie

said. "Why the hell you want my beer? What kind of cop wants my fucking *beer*?"

"I don't," Cody said with a twisted smile. He holstered his weapon and climbed back into his Ford. He roared away, thinking he wanted that beer so goddamned bad right now he would have killed them both for it.

HE'D HEARD A couple of maxims from Larry after they'd danced around each other for three months. Larry had stopped by his desk one afternoon when no one else was in the office, paused, leaned over until his mouth was an inch from Cody's ear, and said:

"I know you were a hotshot detective in Colorado and I also know your rep as a drunk and a screw-up. I've heard about some of the things you used to do when you grew up here, and your crazy homicidal white-trash family. I've personally arrested two of your uncles and I sent one to Deer Lodge prison. I was shocked as hell when you moved back here, and even more shocked when the sheriff hired you on. I can only speculate that you've got something on him so big and nasty he didn't have a choice."

Cody said nothing, but locked in Larry with his best cop deadeye and refused to blink.

Said Larry, "If so, good for you. More power to you, brother. But since we have to work together, I called a couple of your old partners in Denver. They said you were crazy, violent, and unpredictable. They said you were a loose cannon and you were all over the place like a fart on a hot skillet. But they also said you were a fucking fantastic cop and you went at every case like a bulldog on steroids who wouldn't let go. That you nailed a child-porn king and a sitting Federal District judge in one fell swoop. But they said they didn't really want to ever work with you again

because they wanted to keep their jobs and not spend half their fucking time defending themselves and you to Internal Affairs and the mayor's office.

"Me," Larry said, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But don't ever screw me, and don't ever put me in a position I don't want to be in. Just do the job and show me what you've got, and you'll find out you can trust me. But you need to *earn* my trust because you brought a lot of baggage back with you to Montana."

Cody said nothing.

Larry continued, "There are four things you need to know about this place. One, we only get a homicide about once a year. But that's not good, it's bad. It's bad because most of these jamokes around here," he nodded toward the door to indicate the rest of the sheriff's department as well as the municipal police department across the hall, "never get enough experience to work a murder investigation smoothly. If the homicide is hinky and not a straightforward domestic or bar brawl, it's always the first time for most of 'em. They've grown up watching *CSI* and cop shows and they turn into actors they've seen on the screen instead of remembering their training.

"Second, the most important topic of every day is where to go to lunch. You'll find yourself discussing that particular dilemma more than anything else.

"Third, bad things always happen on a Friday, almost always after you're off duty. So if you're off duty but on call, you better not hit the bottle like I've heard you do.

"Fourth, and most important, take every possible fucking opportunity you can to eat and take a shit, because this county is thirty-five hundred square miles, a third of it roadless."

With that, Larry Olson stormed out of the room.

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CODY THOUGHT OF the third and fourth maxims as he drove up into the mountains. The rain had started again, and heavy-bellied drops smacked against the windshield as if they were committing suicide. The two-lane highway was dark and slick. Canyon Ferry Lake—so named because they'd built a dam to hold back the Missouri and submerge the historic river crossing—simmered like a stew on slow boil because of the rain. The dark wooded canyon wall rose to his left. He realized he was hungry because he hadn't had dinner. His vague plan had been to go to York and have a burger, but a burger without a beer seemed an impossible mission.

And he could use a toilet as well. There were outhouses at Two Camps Vista and another at Devil's Elbow. He hated outhouses because he could never not look down into the pit—sometimes using his flashlight—to see what was floating around down there. It reminded him of too many things.

THE POSSIBLE BODY in the cabin beyond Vigilante Campground made Cody's heart pound and his hands go cold on the steering wheel. His mind raced and scenarios formed. He immediately assumed the worst.

He dug out his cell phone and called Edna at dispatch.

"Is Larry coming?" he asked.

"He's not happy about it."

"I don't blame him."

"Quit pretending you're losing your cell phone signal when you aren't."

He sighed. "Okay."

After a beat, she said, "Should I call the Scooter?"

The county coroner, Skeeter Caldwell, enjoyed his job a little too much and was considered a pain in the ass to work

with ever since he found out he was the only elected official with the authority to arrest the sheriff. Plus, elections were five months away and he wanted to keep a high profile in the local press. Nothing could be done with a body until the coroner arrived. He owned all bodies in Lewis and Clark County and they couldn't be touched or removed without his authority.

"Naw, I'll call him if we have to," Cody said. "I'll confirm it's a body first. The hikers could have seen anything. Lots of things look like hands."

"And I should ignore the call I just got from a drunken miner saying a sheriff's department employee tried to steal his beer outside a bar?"

"Yeah, you should ignore that," Cody said.

HE DROVE JUST under control, taking the switchbacks hard, crossing the faded double center line with each turn. There wasn't a light bar on the Ford so he'd toggled on the switch that turned his headlights into strobes that flashed psychedelically on the wet canyon walls and pine trees. And froze two cow elk in their progress across the highway.

Cody cursed and swerved to the left, his tires dropping off the pavement into the muddy ditch, but he wasn't fast enough. One of the elk inexplicably bounded in front of him and turned her head toward him and their eyes locked a split second before he hit her solidly in the shoulder with the right front fender of the truck. The impact made the Ford fishtail. If it weren't for the front right tire still gripping the pavement, he would have hurtled left into the bank of trees. He jerked the wheel and the Ford bounced up out of the ditch.

He stopped in the middle of the highway, breathing hard, knowing if his brakes hadn't bitten he would have gone



straight off the edge of the mountain into Canyon Ferry Lake. Rain drummed on the roof. A single headlight pointed out into the dark, lighting only the rain that slashed through the beam. He checked his side mirrors. In the red glow of his tail lights he could see the other elk bound up the canyon wall but the one he'd hit was down, its legs churning, head writhing.

"Shit!"

His boot eased off the brake and he began to roll forward again, making sure he could still go forward. The Ford went a few feet before it stopped again. He needed to assess the damage. And he couldn't leave her suffering like that.

Chanting "*Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit . . .*" he got out and walked back along the wet asphalt in the rain and drew his Sig Sauer and shot her in the head. Her thrashing went manic until it stopped altogether. He couldn't shed the after-image of her eyes boring into him before he hit her, even when she closed them now. It took five minutes to pull her off the roadway. She was heavy, wet, and smelled of musk and hot blood.

He took a quick look at his bumper. His right headlight was out and thatches of elk hair were caught in the grille. There was a six-inch gap between the frame and the hood. He could smell the sharp odor of burning hair and meat on the hot surfaces of the motor. He had a couple of thousand dollars in damage and years of jokes from the county maintenance shop guys and fellow cops ahead of him. But the Ford still ran.

*"Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit . . ."*

For his next trick, he climbed into the cab of the Ford to locate a dead body in a burned-out cabin.

*"Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit . . ."*

A body that, in all probability, belonged to someone he

knew and trusted and admired and who had kept him tethered to normalcy the past few months by a single fraying thread. And he could feel the thread unraveling.

## 2

THE RAIN HAD turned to slush by the time Cody Hoyt drove through Vigilante Campground and continued up the sloppy road along Trout Creek. The patrol officer ahead of him was easy to follow because of the deep fresh troughs in the chocolate one-track. His single headlight seemed to light up and suspend the cold viscous rain in midair.

He could never enter the campground—which the U.S. Forest Service contracted with the L&C Sheriff's Department to patrol—without remembering the kegers he used to attend there when he was growing up in junior and senior high. That's when it started, he knew. When he learned that when he drank he could feel like a superman. His muscles and attitude swelled and his reticence and common sense stepped aside. He recalled a fight with baseball bats, remembered the hollow sickening sound his twenty-eight-inch maple bat made when it connected with Trevor McCamber's forehead. Remembered the creamy white belly and thighs of Jenny Thompson under the blue-green glow of his dashboard lights . . . before that belly swelled with his son and he married Jenny in a drunken and hasty ceremony at a ranch outside of town. His best men had been Jack McGuane and Brian Winters, fellow seniors and best friends

at Helena High. Brian thought the wedding was hilarious. Jack tried to pretend it wasn't. Jack's parents spent the ceremony shaking their heads and looking toward the road to see if Cody's father and uncle Jeter would show. They didn't.

After graduation from high school, Cody and Jenny moved from place to place until finally he was back in Montana without her or his boy.

CODY HOYT DROVE under the towering knotty pine archway and over an ancient wooden bridge barely nosing above the foam and fury of Trout Creek filled with runoff. Around a wooded corner was the cabin, and suddenly there were lights in the pure darkness: the headlights of a patrol cruiser trained on the charred remains of the structure, and a single round Cyclopean eye of a departmental Maglite swinging his way and blinding him.

This was the crime scene, all right.

Cody pulled up next to the patrol SUV. Inside the next vehicle, illuminated by the interior lighting, were two citizens. A man in his forties and a woman who looked to be in her early twenties huddled in the backseat. They looked cold and tired, he thought. The man needed a shave. The woman needed a hot shower. He nodded at them through two sets of windows and they nodded back.

The patrol officer, Ryan Dougherty, appeared at his driver's window, and tapped on the glass with the flashlight. In the process of doing it, he blinded Cody again.

Cody powered down the window, and said, "Would you *quit* shining that fucking thing into my eyes?"

"Oh, sorry." The patrol officer, newer to the department than Cody, was blond and baby-faced with a trimmed bristly mustache that said, *Here comes a cop!* and eyes that had not

seen enough. In fact, Cody thought, Dougherty looked flushed, despite the weather.

“What happened to your front end?” Dougherty asked.

“Hit an elk,” Cody said.

“On the way up?”

“Yeah.”

“Bull or cow?”

Cody hesitated. “Cow.”

Cody knew what Dougherty would say next. “Got a cow permit?” he said, grinning.

“Ha ha,” Cody said, deadpan.

“I bet you’ll be hearing that one a lot.”

“I bet I will,” Cody said, nodding toward the patrol vehicle. “Those two the hikers who found the cabin?”

“Yeah. I met them at the York Bar and they showed me the way up here. Here, I got their names . . .” Dougherty dug inside his raincoat for the notebook in his breast pocket. He was in uniform: brown shirt, tan pockets, and epaulets. The reason the dopers called them “L&C County Fascists.”

“I don’t need their names,” Cody said. “Unless you think they did it.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.”

“Did they tromp all over the crime scene?”

“Just a little,” Dougherty said. “It’s hard to tell what they touched.”

Cody said, “Why don’t you ask them?”

“I can do that.”

“Good. Put one of them in this vehicle and interview them separately. Walk them through their movements when they first saw the cabin. Find out which direction they came down, and what they did inside. Find out what they touched and if they took anything. It’s amazing how many times citizens take souvenirs from a crime scene. If

something sounds wrong or their stories don't match, come get me."

"Yes, sir," Dougherty said. The flush was gone from his cheeks. Cody could tell he was beating himself up for taking their story at face value.

"I'm gonna go take a look," Cody said.

"It's wetter than hell," Dougherty said. "The ash from the fire makes it all . . . soupy."

Cody glared at him. "Have *you* been in the crime scene?"

Dougherty looked away for a second, and when he turned his head back he said, "A little."

Cody's voice was ice. "How fucking little?"

"Enough to confirm there's a body. A big fat one."

Cody took a deep breath of wet air.

"You aren't gonna write me up, are you?" Dougherty asked. "I was thinking, Jesus, what if the person is still alive?"

"Don't lie." He repeated a sheriff's department bromide: "You lie, you die, Dougherty. You wanted to see a burned-up dead body. Everybody wants to see a dead body until they see one. Have you had your fill?"

"Christ, yes," Dougherty said, shaking his head. "I'll be seeing that *thing* in my dreams."

"Step aside so I can get my rain gear," Cody said.

HIS FOUL WEATHER gear was in a heavy plastic box in the back of his SUV and there was no way to reach it from the inside, so he grabbed his Colorado Rockies baseball cap, jammed it on, and opened the door. The cold rain stung when it hit his bare face and hands. He could remember only one other time when he got his rain gear out, the previous spring when he was called to a ranch because the foreman thought he saw Middle Eastern terrorists

photographing a missile silo. Turned out the photographers were farmers from India on an agricultural mission sponsored by the State of Montana and their interest was wheat, not missile silos. But it rained so rarely in Montana, Cody thought, that packing rain gear was almost silly. He didn't know a single person who owned an umbrella, for instance.

He leaned into the back of the Expedition while he wrestled with the box. It was jammed against the backseat and he had to pull it over the top of the rest of his gear—his long-gun case, large evidence box, canvas duffel packed with two armored vests, a survival crate the sheriff insisted they carry with them filled with a sleeping bag, candles, food, and water. While he threw the boxes around and got the one with his crime-scene clothing, he could feel the rain soaking through the back of his shirt and jeans. His boots were already wet from the puddle in the parking lot.

Even though it was getting more pointless by the second, he pulled on rain pants and slipped Tyvek booties over his wet boots. Instead of a raincoat he pulled on a full-length Australian oilcloth duster. Rain immediately beaded on the fabric.

His cell phone burred and he dug it out and saw the call was from his son Justin. Justin was an anomaly to Cody—miraculously, the only genuinely good person he knew. Justin was kind, selfless, and admirable. Plus he was tall and nice-looking and had a sweet temperament. Cody had no idea how he could have spawned such a child, given his own foibles and his long lineage of white-trash relatives. Every time Cody saw his son he looked for signs of his own obsessions and bad traits and had yet to see them. Justin was a fucking miracle at seventeen years old, Cody thought.

“Hey,” Cody said. “This is bad timing.”

“Hi, Dad. Sorry, but I wanted to ask you something.”

"I'm on a crime scene," Cody said. "Can I call you back later?"

"Yeah, but do it quick. I'm gonna be gone for a while."

"Gone where?"

"Didn't Mom tell you?"

"I haven't talked to her."

"Oh."

"Look, Justin, this is a really bad time."

"You said that," his son said, not masking his disappointment well. "I wanted to ask you if I could borrow—"

"You can borrow anything you want of mine," Cody said. "Don't worry about it. I've got to go. Later."

He snapped the phone shut and crammed it in his pocket, feeling guilty and angry at himself for cutting off Justin.

CODY GRABBED HIS digital camera and light setup and his favorite flashlight, a Maglite with an extension that held six batteries and could be swung like a heavy lead pipe—with the same results. It was better than that twenty-eight-inch maple bat. The long flashlights had been banned from most police departments, which Cody saw as a further sign of official wimpification. He turned toward the burned-up cabin.

As Dougherty escorted the female hiker into Cody's SUV, he said, "Look at you. You look like a gunfighter in that coat. I need to get me one of those. *Cool.*"

Cody sighed.

AS HE APPROACHED the cabin he tried to clear his mind of everything in it, including Justin's call, to make it a fresh whiteboard. He wanted to view the scene with absolute open-minded clarity. He knew this was his only chance to investigate the scene without anyone around. If there was



a body, the place would be swarming with people within the hour. Skeeter would be there with his deputy coroner and perhaps a reporter from the Helena *Independent Record*. Skeeter would feign innocence as to why the reporter was there, but everybody would know he called her before he rolled. There might even be a team from one of two local television stations, although he knew they operated lean going into the weekends. And Sheriff Tub Tubman, also up for reelection, would no doubt arrive in his Suburban with Undersheriff Cliff Bodean just a few steps behind him. Mike Sanders, the other detective on call, might surprise him with his presence because the sheriff was there, no doubt bitching about the fact no one had called him. The forensics unit shared by the Helena PD would be present, as would the county evidence tech. So until the scene became chaotic, this was his opportunity to see it fresh. He couldn't do anything about the fact that the hikers had reported seeing a hand, but he tried to ignore that, also. He wanted to see the hand for himself as if he'd stumbled upon it. If there was a hand.

If there was a body.

Because if there was a body and it belonged to whom he thought and if the evidence pointed to a homicide, he'd personally go after who did it like a rabid dog until he took that person down. And he wasn't thinking Deer Lodge, Montana, where the state penitentiary was located. He was thinking Dirt Nap, Montana. Which was just about anywhere he wanted it to be.

CODY OPENED THE beam on his Maglite as he approached on a flagstone footpath. He moved slowly, taking in not only the cabin itself but anything of note on the path, which was the only walkway to the place from a gravel parking

area. Looking for anything out of place; a wrapper, a cigarette butt, a spent cartridge. He saw nothing unusual.

The cabin was originally built in the 1920s on the edge of a meadow that sloped down to Trout Creek. The twenty acres of wooded land that went with it was surrounded on three sides by the Helena National Forest. An agreement had been granted years before to the Forest Service for a public easement for access to the trails in the Big Belts. That's how the hikers stumbled on the scene.

The cabin was built of logs and had a deck overlooking the meadow in back and a covered porch in front. Tall spruce trees bordered it on three sides. Although it had fallen into disrepair in the 1970s, the structure had been expensively renovated and restored. At least before half of it burned down, that is.

The cabin was, quite simply, half the size it should have been. The left side was burned to the ground except for a black woodstove and chimney that leaned dangerously toward the creek. The right side was perfectly intact. He looked at the right side first, where the bedrooms and kitchen were. Rainwater coursed down bronze-colored logs, and there were lace curtains in the windows. A plaque near the front door read LEAVE YOUR TROUBLES OUTSIDE BEFORE ENTERING. He smiled bitterly at that.

He slowly circled the outside of the cabin, flashlight down, walking a perimeter he would later flag with yellow plastic CRIME SCENE tape to keep the press and public out. The ground was soaked and muddy. There was standing water in every depression. The grass was long and hadn't been mowed for a while. Long blades of it bent down as if depressed, heavy droplets on every point. He looked for footprints wherever the grass gave way to dirt. He saw none except for two sets of fresh hiking boot impressions. He shot

photos of the footprints and checked to see if they were good shots on the display screen on the back of his camera. He knew where they came from, and glanced back toward the parking area. Dougherty had moved from interviewing the male in his Ford to the department vehicle where the female hiker had been asked to stay.

Then he carefully approached the burned-out part of the cabin, and twisted the lens of his Maglite to narrow and brighten his field of view.

The floor of the burned rooms consisted of black wet tarlike sludge; ash mixed with rainwater. It looked like wet black cement. Fallen timbers and collapsed framing stuck out from the soup. As did the woodstove, a charred black metal desk with a squared-off black box on top of it, and the metal frames of an easy chair, fold-out couch, and gun safe.

It all smelled of charcoal, smoke, rain, and damp. And something else: barbecued pork.

A tangle of wooden beams and wall joints had fallen on the metal skeleton of the couch. But protruding from the tangle was a swelled and waxy-looking arm. On the end of the arm was an outstretched human hand, the fingers splayed out as if to say *Stop!*, the hand so bloated he could barely see the glint of a gold wedding band on the third finger. The skin of the forearm looked crispy and black, like the burn on the side of a roasted marshmallow. Cody further narrowed the beam on the flashlight to a five-inch spot to peer further inside the load of burned wood. A naked thigh, the skin burned and split to reveal neon orange fat like a pig or a goose.

Cody closed his eyes and reached up and took his cap off and let the rain hit him in the face.

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